

The Language of Autobiography and Fiction: Gide, Barthes, and Robbe-Grillet

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André Gide's *Journals*, Roland Barthes's *Barthes*, and Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Le miroir qui revient* are autobiographical works. However, each author challenges the authority of the biographical mode by alluding directly or indirectly to the ways in which life and art overlap. This study analyzes autobiography as fiction in the works of these three writers and the degree to which the two genres overlap.

Central to the problem of all representation is the ability of language to signify. Whether words are used to represent actual lives or characters of fantasy, the gap between the signifier and the signified is always the same. It is language that describes both the real and the imaginary. Insofar as we are dealing with the texture and materiality of words, autobiography has no particular claim on the truth. Moreover, since words are used to construct works of fiction and autobiography, it is perhaps not surprising that their capacity to signify has imbued both genres with a vitality that seems to make them live.

Nonetheless, in recent years, the mimetic properties of language have been devalued, and art, particularly reflexive art, is viewed as an expression of language's ability to refer only to itself. It is perhaps axiomatic that language is not the reality it claims to represent. Indeed, the poetics of postmodernism has been foregrounding the story of telling (reflexivity) rather than the telling of a story (mimesis). This emphasis calls attention to the creative process itself, to the adventures of writing, and not to the writing of adventures. Adventure stories rely on true-to-life characters, plot, and suspense. The seams in the writing are folded in, inconsistencies are eliminated, and plausibility is enhanced. The plot resolves according to expectations, and the scaffolding used to construct the edifice is hidden. Nothing interferes with the illusion of truth. All this assumes, of course, that there is a truth to be captured and that fiction can render a reality that mirrors life. This notion, concerning art's mimetic properties, persists even to this day, and from Aristotle to the present, artists have been urged to imitate nature.

Postmodern writers and post-structuralist thinkers have been challenging this illusion and these conventions with new art forms marked by discontinuity, indeterminacy, reflexivity, and plurivocalism. Fiction as a coherent, unified signifying system is now suspect, and it is the erosion of language as a signifying entity that has attracted the attention of philosophers, semioticians, and writers. But if the language of fiction is no longer able to mirror reality, how should we now view the language of autobiography? Is an author's memory reliable? Are his perceptions trustworthy? Is the ego twisting the facts? If an author's account is flawed by mnemonic holes, distortions of perception, and the pitfalls of self-interest, then surely, the "facts" in someone's autobiography cannot, in any objective sense, be "true." Moreover, all reality is always inevitably skewed due to the nature of the subject-object relationship. The relationship between the perceiver and the perceived, even in scientific experiments, affects the results. The nature of the object (evidence) changes depending on the point of view of the observer, i.e., the system used to define it.

Furthermore, if we accept Jacques Lacan's theory that all discourse veils the coexistence in the unconscious of death and desire--a reality that is repressed--then autobiography lies as much as fiction does. Both genres mask the truth which can only manifest itself disguised as metaphor or metonymy. Behind the figural motifs of discourse (fiction or autobiography) lurk the scars of the primal repression and the discourse of the Other--that

other self, disguised as an actor, who struts and frets upon the stage of the unconscious. We are led to conclude, therefore, that autobiography is no more reliable than fiction, and that its ability to state the truth is flawed. This decentering and merging of genres that were once considered separate emphasizes both the materiality of language and the elusive discourse of the Other. Decentering foregrounds the aleatory nature of the Real and the continuous slippages of meaning. Reality has become a labyrinth of desire, connotation, and linguistic traces that defy our attempts to isolate or delimit them.

In *Si le grain ne meurt* (his autobiography), Gide says that fiction may reveal more of the truth than autobiography.¹ Barthes invites his readers to read his autobiography, entitled *Barthes*, as fiction.² Robbe-Grillet's autobiography, entitled *Le miroir qui revient*, is half fiction and myth--a further deliberate blending of genres. Since language as a sign-system is not the reality it purports to signify, the language of autobiography that reconstructs the past, and the language of fiction that strives to construct its own reality are essentially the same. In both instances--whether fiction or autobiography--language is affected by the gaps, veilings, and traces that Ferdinand de Saussure, Lacan, and Jacques Derrida say interfere with representation. Language always carries the burden of transmitting meaning independently of the "reality" that it is meant to signify. The central feature of each of these three autobiographies is that their authors deliberately cast them as fiction in order to call attention to language as a signifying system.

Each author mistrusts paternalistic authority, bourgeois values, and essentialist thinking. Their writings strive to undermine doxal systems, i.e., thinking that is arbitrary but nonetheless imposed as true; encratic language, i.e., the language that justifies such thinking, and normative codes. Their works deconstruct clichés, received ideas (*les idées reçues*), the ready-made, in short, all systems that claim to be natural or God-given, but which are, they assert, arbitrary and man-made.

Gide's fiction, his *Journal*, his essays, and his correspondence dramatize the now famous Gidean dialogue--the dialogue of extremes. Gide's formula for successful fiction, using a botanical metaphor, was to compare the creative process to the flowering of a plant. The idea was to plant the seed, observe the growth, and snuff out all but the terminal buds. This procedure guaranteed the blooming of a monstrous flower, a blooming that is an excrescence, one that Gide compares to the classical artistic idea of catharsis. By cultivating an aspect of the self that bothers you the most, said Gide, you rid yourself of it in the process. The writing of *L'immoraliste* and *La porte étroite*, for example, was part of an artistic dialogue designed to oppose two value systems: freedom from authority and subservience to it. In order to cure the consumption that is killing him, Michel, the main character of *L'immoraliste*, rejects all conventions--religious, moral, and cultural--in order to affirm his freedom, his strength, his body, and his Nietzschean "disponibilité." In contrast to him, Alissa, the main character of *La porte étroite*, submits to a religious code and sacrifices herself and happiness on earth in order to be worthy of the life everlasting that she believes God has reserved for her. Michel and Alissa represent two extremes. In his pursuit of the blueprint of human nature, which he thinks exists, Michel rejects authority, whereas Alissa submits to the will of God (as she interprets it) in a heroic feat of self-abnegation. Gide himself, however, is critical of both characters, emphasizing their flawed pursuits. He insists, moreover, that in purging himself of the tendencies of each, he rids himself of their predilections. Insofar as the sensuality of Michel and the asceticism of Alissa coexist, barely disguised, in Gide's autobiography *Si le grain ne meurt*, each character, or aspect of himself, by analogy, is the monstrous flower that he cultivates in order to expose its flaws.

¹ André Gide (Paris: Gallimard, 1928) 281.

² Roland Barthes (Paris: Seuil, 1975) 1.

Few writers have called as much attention as Gide has to the interweaving strands of his life and his fiction. Indeed, the fictional episodes and moral climate of *L'immoraliste* and *La porte étroite* exist in recognizable form in *Si le grain ne meurt* and in his *Journal*. Gide fictionalizes himself in his autobiographical writings in order to focus on the mirroring of his fiction that this procedure offers. He cultivates religious, ethical, and behavioral extremes as though he himself were another fictional character subject to the same foibles, needs, pitfalls, and desires. Nonetheless, throughout this dialogue of his opposed identities, Gide demonstrates that his Protean self, that this dialectical movement between contrasting value systems is a dynamic that enables him to pursue the reality of an authentic being. Jean-Paul Sartre recognized the importance of Gide's work for the twentieth century when he said that Gide was one of the four coordinates of modern thought, the others being Marx, Hegel, and Kiergaard. Gide's pursuit of authenticity and freedom were already the ingredients of Sartre's existentialism, and Sartre was quick to recognize his indebtedness to the author of *Les faux-monnayeurs*.

Gide's assaults on moral blindness and counterfeit behavior were part of his ethical and aesthetic program. He was as careful to dissect his own weaknesses as he was to expose them in his varied personae. Inevitably, he himself moved beyond the immobility, stagnation, and death of Michel and Alissa in order to compare himself (in works that bear their names) to his two preferred mythical and fictional characters: Oedipus and Theseus. Gide admires Oedipus for his intellectual energy and his indefatigable pursuit of the truth, and he admires Theseus for his involvement in the human arena and his commitment to action. Indeed, Gide's voyages to the Congo and to the Soviet Union were part of the ongoing dialectic, this time in the sociopolitical arena. *Voyage au Congo* and *Le retour de l'URSS*, respectively, dramatize capitalist exploitation of the native workers in the Congo by the Belgian Railway Company, as well as the absence of freedom and individual rights under Stalin's communist regime. Gide was opposed to all forms of control, wherever they might exist, that deprived men and women of their dignity, their independence, and their right to self determination. His novel, *L'école des femmes*, specifically addresses the problems of women caught in the web of paternalistic thinking and male expectations. Gide was also the first person to champion publicly the rights of homosexuals and, although in his own relationships with his wife, Madeleine, he was less candid, the image of himself that he tried to project to his audience, in his fiction and in his autobiographical writings, was the image of a person striving for total honesty and authenticity. He is one of the twentieth-century's great writers as well as a man committed to social action, and it was this commitment that Sartre responded to and honored.

Insofar as it opposes encratic language and the inauthenticity of bourgeois thinking, Gide's dialogic imagination pursues the discourse of the other within his fiction and his autobiography. His *parole* (his writings) opposes the *langue* (ideology) of the establishment. Indeed his subversion of ideology (social, religious, political) is one of the reasons Barthes admires him so much and explains the fact that his first published essay was on Gide: "sur andré gide et son journal."³

Like Gide, Barthes embarks on a deconstruction of bourgeois ideology or, as he prefers to call it, the myth of nature. Unlike Gide, who focuses on institutions, Barthes focuses primarily on language, by drawing on linguistics and psychoanalysis, in order to demonstrate that everybody's mother tongue is a repository of unconscious values. Barthes believes that because ideology is encoded in language men assume that their most cherished notions about the world are natural. Such ideas, he says, perpetuate the error of a monolithic human nature or essence which, by virtue of its dominance and arrogance, is suspicious of difference, whereas Barthes's thinking, like Gide's, is predicated on difference(s). As a small boy Gide once cried out in despair that he was not like

³ Roland Barthes. Reprinted in *Magazine Littéraire* 97 (1975).

the others,⁴ feelings that would, in due course, crystalize into a tract on homosexuality entitled *Corydon*.

Barthes's preferred writing mode, as was Gide's in his *Journal*, is the short paragraph or fragment in which he explores an idea or comments on a particular topic in a pithy epigraph-like ending. These fragments are often halfway between confession and fiction and, in many instances, resemble the autonomy of Edouard's *Journal* in Gide's novel *Les faux-monnayeurs*. It is less a case of life imitating art as it is a classic example of language being used reflexively. Because the signified is always absent, the language of fiction and the language of autobiography have an identical material reality and autonomy. For Barthes, this materiality becomes a body, the body of the text--his spiritual and textual autobiography. His writing is frequently composed of "writerly" fragments, i.e., fragments without a story line, or the organized coherence of an essay. Moreover, Barthes, like Derrida, overrides the customary breakdown between fiction and essays, and criticism, thereby forcing his audience to cope with a certain "defamiliarization" of expectations. It is a form of "alienation."

These terms, normally applied to fiction or to Bertolt Brecht's theater, endow the audience with a critical distance that enables it to grasp how the bourgeois myth perpetuates itself, and why the bourgeoisie believes that its order is the only natural order. Since Barthes maintains that his writings are a form of autobiography--an intellectual autobiography--he prefers to minimize the importance of birthdates, names, progenitors, diseases, and so forth. Indeed, he opposes his civil status (*état civil*) to the corpus of his work and, in an autobiography composed of fragments, refers to himself in the third person, as though he were a character in a novel. In the work entitled *Barthes* (a collection of pictures of his boyhood), pictures of his mother, his birthplace, and of grandparents (without identifying names) replace the details of the customary written ancestry. The headings of the succeeding fragments follow, more or less in alphabetical arrangement, thus calling attention to the arbitrariness of their placement (Saussure speaks of the arbitrariness of the sign), as well as to the letters themselves--A, B, C, and so forth--from which every written text is composed.

Barthes has given the photographs and the text a Lacanian flavor, nudging his informed readers to seek out the discourse of the Other. There are photographs of Barthes with his mother, references to the death of his father, allusions to the absence of the Law, an emphasis on desire and on the bliss of writing--preferably orgasmic (writers, says Barthes, have an incestuous relationship with their mother tongue)--all incorporating elements of the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real.⁵ Gide, Barthes, and, in due course, Robbe-Grillet, derive pleasure, if not bliss, from the subversion of the name-of-the-father and of the bourgeois order for which it stands.

Since Barthes wrote an essay on Gide, we should perhaps not be surprised to find a Robbe-Grillet essay on Barthes entitled *Pourquoi j'aime Barthes*.⁶ Also, Barthes has four seminal essays on Robbe-Grillet published in *Essais critiques*. Nor should it surprise us that Robbe-Grillet's own critiques of bourgeois order and of the myth of nature frequently echo Barthes's distaste for the sticky insidiousness of bourgeois ideology and its pervasive arrogance. In keeping with his desire to write autobiographical fiction, Robbe-Grillet's *Le miroir qui revient* contains childhood reminiscences and adult commentaries. He juxtaposes fragments of memory, myth, history, and the imagination in order to define himself and his values by referring, among other things, to the quasi-fictitious life of a certain Baron (or Count) Henri de Corinthe--a mythical character whose presence can be traced to the

⁴ *Si le grain ne meurt* 135.

⁵ *Barthes* 119.

⁶ (Paris: Bourgois, 1978).

legend of "la fiancée de Corinthe" that Jules Michelet describes in his historical study entitled *La sorcière*. In fact, Henri de Corinthe becomes an alter ego for Robbe-Grillet (a mythical other). Moreover, Robbe-Grillet asserts that he has never spoken of anyone but himself, maintaining that fiction is a truer portrait of the writer than autobiography: "In the final analysis, fiction is an expedient that is more *personal* than the alleged sincerity of confession."⁷ He believes that his work consists in relating fables, and in replacing the elements of his biography with figural themes and motifs which he calls *des opérateurs*, a thematics that is a more accurate reflection of an author's self than a consciously projected, and therefore distorted portrayal could be.⁸ In *Le miroir qui revient* (his autobiography) he says: "Once again it is within fiction that I venture forth."⁹

A recurring mirror is also the code image of reflexive fiction of an art that mirrors itself. Reflexive art is a metalanguage that undermines the realism of the natural world. Indeed, Robbe-Grillet's fiction is an art that opposes nature. It devalues the real in favor of imaginary constructions. The metaphorical language of fiction enables us to visualize and understand the autobiographical language of the self. Since no sign-system is the reality it purports to signify, its analogical signs and images enable us to apprehend the artist's self projected on the mind-screen of his fantasy world. Insofar as this fantasy world recreates material that is culturally repressed, while alluding to the intertext (Derrida) or the archive of art, history, and the collective unconscious (Foucault), it gives its readers insights into the nature of language, how myths function, and how art as a metalanguage can help to deconstruct the nightmare of repressive ideologies. Ideology always claims to be natural, i.e., the logical outgrowth of language and nature whose representation is alleged to be transparent, whereas, in fact, language, nature, and things are all opaque. Robbe-Grillet's works strive to duplicate this opacity while devaluing the simplistic currencies of bourgeois values and of the ready-made. In the final analysis he demonstrates that all values are man-made, that all sign-systems oppose nature, and, therefore, the language of autobiography is as removed from reality as the language of fiction. *Le miroir qui revient* is assembled from the imagery of the West's mythical unconscious: Christianity, representation, the emergence of man and of the self, the deification and the reification of woman.

Robbe-Grillet's metaphorical language is also the living mirror of the person using it. He describes *Le miroir qui revient* as the first panel of a series that might have been entitled *Romanesques*, a term that Barthes also uses to define the fictional dimension of his own autobiography. One photograph entitled "The Mirror Stage: 'this is you,'" depicts a baby Barthes in his mother's arms facing the camera, i.e., the mechanical mirror. In an essay that appeared in *La Quinzaine Littéraire* entitled, "Je n'ai jamais parlé d'autre chose que de moi," Robbe-Grillet says that "*Le miroir qui revient* corresponds to Lacan's mirror stage: the child reglues the fragments on the mirror and discovers that the image of itself is another!"¹⁰ Because autobiography and fiction are normally studied as separate genres, any attempt to meld their individual characteristics may be perceived as unusual, perhaps even radical. Nonetheless, these three writers have explored the ontological and epistemological consequences of such writing by blurring the boundaries between the two genres.

Insofar as men and women function within the context of an individual, political, and mythical unconscious, the reader's role is to distinguish between the personal and the collective discourse(s) that are in constant dialogue. This playing back and forth, in the works of Gide, Barthes, and Robbe-Grillet enables us to understand the terroristic nature

⁷ *Le miroir qui revient* (Paris: Minuit, 1984) 17. My translation.

⁸ *Le miroir qui revient* 18.

⁹ *Le miroir qui revient* 13. My translation.

¹⁰ *La Quinzaine Littéraire* 432 (16 to 31 Jan. 1985) 6. My translation.

of authoritarian language and the ideology that underpins it. Deconstructing nature and the ideology of the natural is therefore desirable if we are to step out of "the prison-house of language." To read autobiography as fiction, and vice versa, is an enlightened attempt to transgress the barriers of the arbitrary. This endeavor demonstrates a certain amount of freedom, a certain latitude, comparable to a door playing back and forth on its hinges. However, behind every conscious discourse lurks the (unconscious) discourse of the Other. The discursive dramatization of the unconscious is the ongoing play of life itself and of its signifiers. Autobiography read as fiction is the study of the self within language and of the discourse of the Other within the self. It may be compared to the interpenetrating chambers of a Klein bottle in which the inside tubes and the outside walls are in a state of constant exchange and reversibility.

By dramatizing the linguistic (artistic) systems that stage these dialogic connections, Gide's, Barthes's, and Robbe-Grillet's writings transgress the normative codes that would maintain the separateness of autobiography and fiction. A new genre emerges that is neither one nor the other, but something in between--a "fictography." The narrative fragments, mnemonic gaps, linguistic traces, specular modes, ludic structures, and self-conscious figurations of this new genre reveal the discourse of the Other, the subversion of the Law ("le non/nom du père"), and the presence of Desire.